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Morris Student Team Presents Rural Technology Research

Summary: A team of five University of Minnesota, Morris students recently presented research on broadband Internet connectivity for rural America at the statewide Blandin Foundation conference in Duluth.

(January 28, 2010)-A team of five University of Minnesota, Morris students recently presented research on broadband Internet connectivity for rural America at the statewide Blandin Foundation conference in Duluth.

Rural America is often used in imagery to capture ideals of community and a sense of safety. However, the small town is a quickly fleeting breed. Across the country, rural cities are losing jobs, their young, and their ability to meet the needs of the residents who remain. Combating these issues will require many changes in rural communities—one of the key adaptations for greater Minnesota will be increasing internet access and broadband infrastructure.

The Blandin Foundation developed its Broadband Initiative with this in mind. To understand where youth stand in this picture, they invited teams of college students to present at their statewide conference, “Realizing Our Broadband Future: Getting from Here to There,” in Duluth in October 2009. Morris students presented their research to an audience of almost one hundred people and later participated in a panel discussion on the future of small communities in America and the implications for youth.

A student team from the Morris campus volunteered, choosing to present on the city of Willmar in Kandiyohi County. The City of Willmar has worked with the Blandin Foundation for the past few years to educate business leaders and to understand broadband coverage in the city. All Minnesota residents, Samantha Bruno ’13, Foley, Will Dolezal ’11, St. Paul, Clara Dux ’11, Stewartville, Tara Greiman ’11, Dayton, and Joshua Preston ’12, Montevideo, the Morris campus students met with Willmar high school graduates, Ridgewater Technical College students, the Willmar Chamber of Commerce, the Kandiyohi and Willmar Economic Development Commission, and private businesses to gather their research. The Morris student team also researched the City of Willmar’s economy, finding that, despite the state and national recession, Willmar’s economy has actually grown over the past two years. Businesses have also seen an improvement since broadband expansion and since working with the Blandin Foundation.

In their study, the Morris campus team came to several important conclusions. Many Willmar students attend Ridgewater Technical College, Willmar, which offers several online courses and online test requirements. This reinforces the importance of reliable, fast Internet for educational institutions located in rural areas. But the Worldwide Web’s reach exceeds the education sector. By building internet capabilities, businesses are able to expand their capacity and connect more easily with their producers. What’s more, workers can increase their quality of life by living where they want and working at the job they want from home.

The Blandin Foundation, which works to strengthen rural communities, states in its vision for broadband in Minnesota that “To ensure a high quality of life and a globally competitive future for its citizens, businesses and communities, Minnesota is committed to making the necessary investment to become a world leader in the universal deployment and use of ultra high-speed next generation broadband.” They have been working towards this goal since 2003.

Tara Greiman '11, who works for the Center for Small Towns (CST), composed the University of Minnesota, Morris research team. CST staff provided oversight and guidance of the project. The University of Minnesota, Morris CST is a community outreach program, which serves as a point-of-entry to the resources of the University of Minnesota. Small towns, local units of government, K-12 schools, non-profit organizations, and other University units are able to utilize the Center's resources as they work on rural issues or make contributions to rural society. CST's mission is to focus the University's attention and marshal its resources toward assisting Minnesota's small towns with locally identified issues by creating applied learning opportunities for faculty and students.

PHOTO: left to right, Josh Preston, Clara Dux, Will Dolezal, Samantha Bruno, Tara Greiman

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